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Ⓜ OBSERVATION: Venetian hospitality  
**Holding back the tide**  
*Venice*

Unnoticed by tourists, the Floating City's restaurant workers must contend with the elements to serve up their top-table delights.

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Before dawn, the narrow cobblestone thoroughfares of Venice are deserted apart from street sweepers and delivery people wheeling carts of fresh produce to restaurants. Along the quiet alleys, there are still wet patches from the previous night's tidal floods that have now receded – a frequent occurrence in this city of islands, where the shallows of the Adriatic flank many paths and roads.

At Piazza San Marco, Venice's lowest-lying location, some of the puddles are deep enough to become baths for the seagulls. When MONOCLE arrives at the Grancaffè Quadri restaurant, staffer Daniel Galindo is busy vacuuming up floodwater from the dining room's floor. "The city is set on a lagoon so we have to live with this," he says.

Running a restaurant on dry land is already complicated; in Venice, it also requires staff who are comfortable with being at the mercy of aquatic forces.

First inaugurated in 1638 and originally called Il Rimedio, the Grancaffè Quadri has been a fixture of Piazza San Marco for centuries. The Alajmo family took over in 2011, with a revamp of the upstairs by star designer Philippe Starck, a menu by chef Massimiliano Alajmo of the three-Michelin-starred Le Calandre and a kitchen headed by chef Sergio Preziosa, who earned Quadri its own Michelin star. Clearly, high waters and cramped kitchens haven't held back the team.

A few steps from the Grancaffè Quadri, at the dock near the Palazzo Ducale, sunbeams break through the clouds onto the Grand Canal. The scene looks like a Canaletto painting but there's no time to be distracted: MONOCLE is here to observe the restaurant staff unload cartons of olive oil, wine and pasta. The men perform a well-practised dance, forming a human chain of box-tossing. Then they dexterously wheel their handcarts between the columns of San Marco and San Todaro, and into the Grancaffè Quadri's kitchen through the back-alley door. Wine, however, is inconveniently stored in a separate space some distance away. "That too is a reality in Venice," says Galindo. "You can't have a cellar in a city where water flows underneath." As they get to work, we venture to Venice's Rialto Market to meet fishmonger



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1. Fishmonger Marco Bergamasco
2. Unloading dockside
3. Produce has to be carted from the docks to the kitchen
4. Chef Sergio Preziosa in the Philippe Starck-designed dining room
5. Catching produce is anything but a snip
6. Waiting game
7. Restaurant table overlooking Piazza San Marco
8. Kitchen spaces are narrow but turn out wonders

Marco Bergamasco, who shows us around the many steel stalls piled up with cod, squid, razor clams and other sea creatures. Then we climb into his motorboat to return to the Grancaffè Quadri and deliver a crate of sea bass; the fish is a key part of today's lunch menu. "You can't take a sick day in this line of work," says Bergamasco, ducking his head as we glide under a low canal bridge. Still, having left a cushy industrial design career to be on the water every morning, he loves his job.

Tourists on dry land photograph the passing gondolas but largely ignore us. The everyday labour of the city's residents and workers that keeps it all afloat is invisible to most visitors. Docking to deliver the fish, we notice that though water has gathered in large puddles on the piazza, the Grancaffè Quadri remains almost miraculously dry as a result of its staff's efforts. "Everything is twice as complicated here," says chef Sergio Preziosa. Even so, the restaurant maintains the atmosphere of a heart-warming old-time establishment.

Inside, handsome waiters are dressing the tables with white cloths, while young chefs stock the kitchen and prepare their stations. The waiters have now changed into their formalwear: tuxedos with bow ties, their hair pomaded. There is jazz music playing as the doors open at 09.30. "Pronti?" they call towards the kitchen. There's a long day ahead: the doors won't close until midnight. — Ⓜ